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# Kara no Kyoukai Volume 04

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---and she said.

If you are willing to take in anything  
You'll never be wounded.

Anything that you don't fit.

Anything that you don't like.

Anything that you don't allow.

If you take in anything without reacting  
You'll never be wounded.

If you are willing to reject everything  
You'll only be wounded.

Everything that you fit.

Everything that you like.

Everything that you dream.

If you reject everything without a sacrifice  
You'll only be wounded.

A gap between two hearts.  
Unable to both affirm and deny.  
Between them, there is nothing.  
Between them, there is I.

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## / Void Shrine

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"Hey, about that patient in the third floor private room, have you heard?"

"Of course. That story was all over the place by the middle of yesterday. Even that stony Dr. Ashika in neurology lost his cool, didn't he? There's no way a secret like that wouldn't leak out. I couldn't believe it but, they say the patient's recovered."

"No, no, it's not that. Well, it is definitely about that patient, but there's something besides that. That patient, you know what she did as soon as she woke up? Don't be shocked, but they say she tried to crush her own eyes."

"--- What are you talking about? Is that for real?"

"Yeah, I think it's being kept secret inside the facility. I heard it from a kid who always follows Dr Ashika around, so it's definitely true. Apparently, as soon as Dr Ashika took his eyes off her, she smashed her eyes through the bandages with the palms of her hands. She's a total terror."

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"Wait a second. That patient, she's just been lying there for two years, hasn't she? Then there's no way she could move her body."

"Well, yeah, normally. That family is rich, aren't they? While she's been here, we've exercised her limbs everyday, so her joints and stuff haven't stiffened up. But I guess that since it wasn't the subject herself doing the exercise, the movement of the joints was unnatural to her and she couldn't move very well. Thanks to that, her attempt to savage her two eyes ended in failure."

"--- Even so, that's awesome. We learned that while a supine patient is more comfortable, it's much easier for their bodies to get weak. If she's been sleeping for two years, she should barely have been functioning as a human."

"That's why even the doctor was caught off guard. Hey, what do you call that? You know, when a patient's sclera is bleeding?"

"Subconjunctival hemorrhaging."

"Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. It's supposed to become alright by itself, but since the patient smashed

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her eyes right to the point of glaucoma she can't even see through her eyes right now. They say that they just bandaged her eyes according to the patient's wishes."

"Hmm. So even after waking up from the coma that patient hasn't seen the sunlight. ... darkness within darkness. It seems a bit wrong."

"A bit? And on top of that, there's another problem. Aphasia... loss of speech? It feels like that. She can't talk, so the doctor's bringing in a speech therapist. There's no one like that at our hospital."

"Yeah, since Dr. Araya quit last month. But --- if she's like that, will they disallow visitors for that patient?"

"Probably. Until she's recovered her psychological balance, even her time with her parents will be limited."

"So that's how it is. In that case, I feel kinda sorry for that boy."

"Who? What boy?"

"Don't you know? After that patient was brought here, there's this kid who came to visit every Saturday. I guess

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he's too old to call a kid anymore, but, if possible, I want to let him meet her."

"Ah, you mean Polite-Puppy-kun. Lord, he's still coming.

I doubt there are many people as earnest as that in the world these days."

"Yeah, for the last two years that kid's been the only one who watched over the patient. So --- I'm thinking that maybe the major part in the patient's miraculous recovery is due to him. ... Wow, I'm saying this sort of thing after working here for how many years? I'm beginning to think that maybe something's happened to me."

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This place is dark, and the floor is pitch black.

When I realized that the only thing around me was the darkness, I accepted the fact that I was dead.

I'm floating in a sea with no light or sound. Naked, without anything to cover her, the human being called Ryougi Shiki is sinking into the depths.

There's no light here. No, I suspect I never fell in the first place.

Since there's nothing here.

It's not just that there's no light, there isn't even any darkness. Since there is nothing here nothing is visible. There is no meaning to the concept of falling.

Inside the 「within which even form is meaningless, just my body keeps sinking. The naked me, I'm a poisonous shade which makes me want to turn my eyes away. Because everything here bears such a poisonous aura.

"--- This is death."

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Even the sound of my muttering seems like a dream.

Then, I observe something like "time". Time has no meaning inside 「, but I become able to observe it.

As naturally as flowing water, as grossly as putrefaction, I am just marking time.

There is nothing here.

Even if I keep continuously looking in the distance, I can't see anything.

Even if I keep waiting continuously for something, I can't see anything.

It's very nice and peaceful.

No --- Since nothing has meaning, just 「beinghere makes everything perfect.

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This is death.

The world which only the dead can reach. The world which the living cannot see.

But, I'm still alive ---.

I thought I would lose my mind.

For two years I sat there in the midst of the concept called "death". Rather than observation, it was closer to the struggle of battle.

With the arrival of morning, the hospital slowly comes alive. The footsteps of the nurses traversing the corridors and the noise of the patients waking up and going about their own business is repeated many-fold. Compared to the silence during the night the bustle of the morning makes me feel like I'm at a festival.

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For the recently woken me, the riotous noise is too much.

Thankfully, my ward is a private room. It's noisy outside, but at least inside this box it's calm and quiet.

Not much later, a doctor comes to examine me.

"How do you feel, Ryougi-san?"

"--- Well, I'm not really sure."

At my emotionless reply, the doctor shuts up as if he's perplexed.

"... Really? At least you seem calmer than yesterday. It might be troubling for you, but I'll explain your current situation. If you don't like what I'm saying, don't hesitate to tell me."

I replied to the doctor's words with silence. I don't have any interest in such obvious stories.

I think he mistook that as a sign of acceptance.

"In that case, I'll make it brief. Today is the fourteenth of June, 1998. You, Ryougi Shiki, were involved in a

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nighttime traffic accident on the fifth of March two years ago and were brought here to this hospital. The accident involved you being hit by a car while on a pedestrian crossing. Do you remember?"

"..."

I don't reply. --- I don't know that sort of thing. The last image I can take off that shelf called "memory" is that of my classmate standing dumbly in the rain. I can't remember anything like how I got into an accident.

"Ah, it's alright if you can't remember. We think that just before you got hit by the car, you realized the danger and tried to evade it. Thanks to that, the injuries to your body weren't serious.

In exchange, we suspect that you received a hard shock to your head. You were already in a coma by the time you arrived at our hospital, but luckily your brain itself wasn't injured. So, the reason you can't remember is probably the confusion brought about by being in a coma for two years. It should only be temporary, as during last night's examination we didn't find any abnormalities in your brainwaves.

Your memories should slowly come back, but I can't guarantee that it will definitely happen. First and

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foremost, the very fact that you recovered from your comatose state is a miracle in itself."

Even if he says it's been two years, it doesn't feel real to me. To the sleeping Ryougi Shiki, that blank space is close to nothingness.

To the being called Ryougi Shiki, yesterday is definitely that rainy night two years ago.

But that isn't how I feel at all.

To the current me, yesterday is 「nothing.

"Oh, and the injury to your eyes isn't so serious either. Injuries caused by blunt weapons are among the least serious eye injuries you tend to see. It's a relief that there weren't any knives or similar objects in your proximity last night. We are going to take the bandages off soon as well. You'll have to leave looking at the scenery outside for another week or so."

I get the feeling that there is a sense of reproach mixed somewhere into the doctor's words.

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He's probably nervous because of my attempt to destroy my own eyes. Last night he kept asking me why I did such a thing; I didn't give him an answer.

"From now on we will be doing rehabilitation exercises in the mornings and afternoons. In regard to visits from your family, I'm afraid one hour will be the limit. You can leave as soon as you recover your body and mind's equilibrium. It will be hard, but please try your best."

As I expected, his words ruin my mood.

Tired of poking fun at the doctor, I try moving my right hand. ...My body doesn't feel like my own. Just moving takes time and my joints and muscles hurt as if they are being pulverized.

Of course, it's only to be expected after not using them for two years.

"Well, that's it for this morning. Since it seems that you've calmed down, I won't call a nurse. If you need anything, press that button near your pillow. There's always a nurse standing by in the room next door, so don't hesitate to use it, even for small things."

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Soft words.

If I could see, I would be able to observe the doctor's instantaneous smile.

The doctor gets up to leave, but stops at the door and adds something, as if he just remembered.

"Oh yes. A counselor is going to come starting tomorrow. Since she's not much older than you, please talk freely with her. Right now, what you need most to aid your recovery is conversation.

And so I was left alone.

I lay back on the hospital bed, just lying there blankly with arms wrapped around the eyes I had closed myself.

"My name ---".

I said with dry lips.

"Ryougi Shiki".

But no such person exists here.

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Because the two years of nothingness killed me.

I can remember clearly all the memories of growing up as Ryougi Shiki. But what does that matter? What are such memories to me, who died and came back to life?

The two years of emptiness completely disconnect the me of the past and the me of the present.

I'm definitely Ryougi Shiki, not someone else. But the memories of the past, I can't feel that they are mine.

To the resurrected me, it's only as if I'm seeing a movie of the life of a person called Ryougi Shiki. I can't think of the movie's main character as being me.

"It's as if I'm a ghost caught on film".

I bite my lips.

I don't know me.

I'm not sure whether I really am Ryougi Shiki.

I feel like a human who doesn't know their own identity.

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This shell of a body is empty; it feels like a cave.

Even the air passes through, like the wind.

I don't know the cause, but it really feels like a huge hole has been punched into my chest.

It's so unsettling, --- indeed it's lonely.

My heart is a misplaced puzzle piece. Inside that empty space, this feather-like me can't stand it.

It's so empty that I can't even find a reason to keep living.

"But --- so what if it is like that, Shiki?"

It's really not such a big deal.

It's fascinating --- this unsettling feeling and nervousness that makes me grasp my chest, I don't feel that it's either agonizing or sad.

There's anxiety. There's pain.

But that's all something the child called Ryougi Shiki is holding onto.

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I'm just apathetic. Even that fact that I've come back to life after two years fails to move me.

I'm just swaying with the wind and wandering here and there.

Without being able to feel that I'm actually alive.

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It's now the next day.

The fact that even I, who can't see, can tell the arrival of the morning is a small but satisfying discovery. Little things like that are a cause for joy. While I wondered why they made me happy, my morning check-up began and ended before I knew it.

It wasn't very quiet in the afternoon, because my mother and older brother came to visit me. Our conversation wasn't very smooth. They felt like strangers to me. With no alternatives, I answered their questions according to Shiki's memories, as a result of which my mother went home with an easy mind.

Everything was funny because, it seemed like I was acting.

When evening came around, the counselor showed up.

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The woman who initially introduced herself as a speech therapist was so bright and cheerful that I couldn't see any depth to her personality.

I've never heard of a case where a doctor greeted a patient with the words "Hi, how have you been?"

"Oh, I thought you would be all emaciated, but the vibrancy of your skin is no joke. You know, when I first heard your story I pictured something along the lines of a ghost under a cherry tree, so I didn't really feel like coming. But hey, you are a cute young lady along my line of fancy, so it's my lucky day!"

The woman who I reckon to be in her late twenties, judging by her voice, sits down in the chair next to the bed I'm lying in.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm the speech therapist who is to help you get over your aphasia. I'm not a resident doctor here, so I don't have any ID, but I guess it won't be a problem since you can't see anyway."

"--- Aphasia? Me?"

"Oho."

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The doctor goes, after finally getting a reply. I get the feeling she nodded her head as well.

"There you go; it's normal to show anger. After all, aphasia isn't a very good image, and in your case it's a misdiagnosis. Ashika-kun is a textbook doctor, so he's a bit weak when it comes to special cases like yours. Even so, you are being naughty. People are getting such misconceptions because you can't be bothered to answer them."

The woman smiles as if she is great friends with me. --- It was totally my own opinion, but I decided then and there that this was a person who wore glasses.

"So they think I have aphasia."

"Yeah, since you did hurt your brain in the accident they are wondering if your speech circuits are damaged or something. However, that's a misconception - the reason for your silence isn't physiological, but psychological, isn't it? So it's not aphasia, just you being stubborn. In that case my role isn't needed, but it feels bad to be cut off before a minute has passed, and since nothing's happening with my main job I'll play with you for a bit."

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--- This is a useless act of kindness.

I reach out for the button to call the nurse, but the lady doctor quickly removes it from my reach.

"... You."

"Dangerous, dangerous. If you talk to Asika-kun now I'll be kicked out straight away. Anyway, isn't this good? If you pretend to have aphasia, you won't have to reply to useless questions. It's better this way, right?"

... That's correct. But who is this person that can say such things so boldly?

I turn my bandaged eyes towards the unknown lady doctor.

"You are not a doctor, are you?"

"Nope, I'm a magus as my main job."

That's so absurd I let out a sigh.

"I don't have any business with a magician."

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"Ahahaha, that's correct. A mage can't fix that hole in your chest. The only thing that can fill it is a normal person."

"--- A hole, in my chest ---?"

"Yeah, you should be feeling it. That you are alone now."

The lady doctor smothers a laugh and stands up. I can hear her arranging the chairs and her footsteps as she goes out.

"I think it's still too early, so let's leave it at this for now. I'll come again tomorrow, bye!"

After appearing so abruptly, she leaves equally as suddenly.

I touch my lips with the right hand that I have difficulty moving.

Now... Alone...

A hole... in my chest...

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--- Oh, how can this be?

Oh no, I hadn't realized.

No one. No matter where I call he's not there. The existence called Ryougi SHIKI that existed within Ryougi Shiki has disappeared without a trace.

Shiki was a dual personality disorder sufferer who possessed another personality within herself. Inside the Ryougi family, children with two personalities were born genetically. That which would be shunned in a normal family was instead celebrated as inherent of a transcendent being, and the bearers were treated as the true heirs of the family.

... Shiki inherited that blood. It was the reason Shiki surpassed her older brother to become the heir to the Ryougi family.

But this kind of thing doesn't happen very often.

Two personalities --- Yang affinity males and Yin affinity females. Between those the leadership of the Yang affinity male is usually stronger. Among the few true Ryougi heirs until now, all had been born as men

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and had female personalities inside. But due to some mistake, Shiki was the reverse of the norm.

Inside the female Shiki, the male, SHIKI, was included.

The one with dominance over the body was the female Shiki --- me.

SHIKI was my *minus* face. He contained my suppressed emotions. Shiki grew up suppressing the darkness called SHIKI. Time after time, she killed the self called SHIKI and lived pretending to be normal. SHIKI didn't seem to have any complaints about that. After being asleep inside of me, he woke up for things like sword training and took charge while complaining as if it was annoying.

... It might seem like a master/servant relationship, but the reality wasn't like that. In the end, Shiki and SHIKI are one person, so Shiki's actions are SHIKI's, and SHIKI suppressing his own fancies was also Shiki's wish as well

... Yes, SHIKI was a murderer. As far as I know he had no experience at it, but he had a desire within him to kill those beings called humans that were the same organism

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as him. The dominant personality of Shiki ignored this - in short, she forbade it.

Shiki and SHIKI were inseparable beings, although they ignored each other. Shiki was lonely, but because of the self called SHIKI, she wasn't alone.

But the time came when that relationship would be destroyed.

Two years ago --- when Shiki was a first year high school student. The season when for the first time, SHIKI, who until then hadn't wanted to use the body, had asked to go out of his own volition.

From there on, Shiki's memory is hazy.

Right now I can't bring to mind any of Shiki's memories from the beginning of the first year of high school, until I was involved in the accident.

The thing I remember --- my shape standing at the site of the murder. More than that, there's an image that I can remember even more clearly than that.

The classroom burning red in the light of the sunset.

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The one who destroyed Shiki, my classmate.

The boy, who Shiki wanted to kill.

The piece of normality, that Shiki wanted to protect.

I got the feeling that I knew this a long time ago.

But, this me that has woken from a long sleep, his name is the one thing I can't yet remember.

Night falls, and the hospital grows quiet.

Only the occasional sound of slippers echoing through the corridors makes me feel that I'm awake.

Inside the darkness --- no, because I'm in the darkness. This blinds me, I take to heart the fact that I'm alone. If I was the previous Shiki, I wouldn't have had this kind of feeling. Shiki, who had another self inside her. But SHIKI no longer exists. No --- I, I don't even know whether I'm Shiki or SHIKI.

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SHIKI had disappeared from inside me. With that alone, I recognize myself as Shiki.

"Hic hic... What kind of contradiction is this? Not knowing which side one is if one side is missing."

I try talking to myself, but the emptiness in my chest doesn't even fill a little. Even just the thought that I am sad would have some change on this emotionless mind of mine.

I won't be able to know.

Since I am no one, I can't feel that Ryougi Shiki's memories are really mine. Even if the shell called Ryougi Shiki exists, when the contents are washed away, the shell has no meaning. .... Oh, it hurts. What must go inside this empty cave?

"--- I, will, go, in..."

Suddenly I hear words like that.

A movement of the air as if a door has opened.

*It's probably my imagination*

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I turn my closed eyes that way.

There's --- something there.

White smoke is billowing. My eyes that shouldn't be able to see can see the shape of the smoke. The smoke strangely resembled a human. No, it seemed as if a human lacked bones and was swaying in the wind like a sunflower.

The unpleasant smoke comes straight at me.

I can't move as I like yet, so I just blankly wait for it.

Even if this is a ghost, I'm not afraid.

The really scary things have no shape. No matter how weird something is, if it has form, I can't be scared.

And --- if it is a ghost, the current me may as well be the same. After all, there's not much difference between a thing that isn't alive and me, who has no reason to live.

The smoke slaps me.

My whole body and mind go into overdrive. The chill that rakes down my spine is as sharp as a bird's talons.

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It was an unpleasant sensation, but I just dumbly sat there and watched. After touching me for an age, the smoke melts like a snail sprinkled with salt.

The reason is simple. It's been five hours since the smoke started touching me. It will soon be five o'clock. The ghost melted because it's now morning.

Since I haven't slept, I decide to go to sleep again.

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The *something*th morning since I woke up comes around. My eyes are still wrapped in bandages, so I can't see a thing.

A quiet morning with no one around.

The wavelet-like silence is so dazzling that I lose my sense of self.

--I can hear the chattering of little birds.

--I can feel the warmth of the sunlight.

--The clear air feels my lungs.

--Ah. Compared to that world, this place is so beautiful.

But, there's a self that's not happy with this. Every time I'm wrapped in the morning air that I can only feel by sense, I just think:

--They are this happy.

Humans are loners like this. Being alone is safest, so how come we can't bear being alone?

The past me was complete. Because I was self-sufficient, I didn't need anyone else. But, I'm

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different now. I'm no longer complete. I'm waiting for a part I lack. I'm just desperately waiting like this.

But just who am I waiting for...?

The lady doctor who called herself a counselor came daily. Before I knew it, I seemed to be treating my talks with her as my only relief from the mundane during the course of the days.

"Hmm, as expected. It's not that SHIKI didn't have control over the body, it's just that he didn't exercise it. You two keep getting more fascinating the more I hear about you."

Still bringing the chair over and sitting there next to the bed, the lady doctor talks as if she's amused by something. For some reason she knows my circumstances very well: the dual personality that only a few even within the Ryougi family know about, my involvement in the serial murder case two years ago. Those are details that normally I would have to keep

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hiding, but to me, they are inconsequential events anyway.

Before I knew it, I was responding to the counselor's light teasing.

"There's nothing funny about having a dual personality."

"No, no. You know, you two don't have anything as pleasing to look at as dissociative identity disorder. Existing simultaneously, each having their own unique will, and on top of that your actions are coordinated. That sort of complex personality shouldn't be called a "dissociated identity," but rather a "united independent personality"."

"United... independent personality?"

"Yeah. Still, some questions remain. In that case, there was no reason for SHIKI to stay asleep, but according to your story he was always sleeping. That part of it is a little strange."

SHIKI, who was always asleep.

... I'm probably the only one who knows why.

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SHIKI, more than Shiki --- liked to dream.

"So, is he still sleeping, that guy?"

I don't reply to the lady doctor's words.

"So that's how it is. He did die. Two years ago during the accident, in your stead.

That's why you have an omission in your memory. Since he's dead, those memories won't be coming back... How Ryougi Shiki was associated with the street serial killer... with this, that knowledge has truly disappeared into the darkness."

"That event. They said that the criminal was never caught."

"Yeah. After your accident, the criminal disappeared as if he were a lie."

I wonder to what extent that is true, the lady doctor said with a laugh.

"However, there was no reason for SHIKI-kun to disappear. If he just stayed asleep, ignoring the world

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outside, Shiki would have disappeared. For some reason, he must have wished for himself to disappear."

That kind of thing, even if she asks me I don't have any answers.

"I don't know. More importantly, did you bring the scissors?"

"Ah, as expected, I couldn't. You have a history, so any potential weapons are strictly forbidden."

The lady doctor's words are according to my expectations. Whether or not it was due to the daily rehab exercises, my body has recovered to the point where I can move easily by myself. They said that I am the first to have recovered so quickly with just a few minutes of exercise twice a day.

As a celebration of sorts, I asked the lady doctor for a pair of scissors.

"But what are you going to use a pair of scissors for? Planning to do some flower arrangements?"

"As if. I just want to cut my hair."

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That's why. Now that I can move my body, my hair that reaches my back has become inconvenient. Hair that bounces around from my neck and flows down to my shoulders is pretty annoying.

"Then you can call a hairdresser. If you find it difficult to talk, should I call one for you?"

"No thanks. Another person touching my hair? I don't even want to think about it."

"That's right. To a woman, her hair is her life. The fact that your hair has grown while you are the same as you were two years ago is a wonderful thing."

I can hear the lady doctor standing up.

"So, shall I give you this instead? It's a stone, carved with a rune; it should do the same thing as a charm. I'll put it over your doorway, so be careful not to lose it to anyone."

It seems that the lady doctor used her chair to place the charm, or whatever it was, over the door.

And just like that, she opens the door.

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"Then, that's it from me. Someone else might come starting tomorrow, so stay well."

Talking in a strange roundabout manner, the lady doctor left.

That night, the guest that always came to visit didn't appear. The smoke-like ghost that appears without failure at midnight - for some reason, it didn't enter the room.

The smoke was coming every night and touching me.

I knew that that was dangerous, but I just left it alone. If that ghost got angry at me and tried to kill me, that would be okay too.

No, rather, how comfortable would it be if it had just killed me?

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For I, who cannot even feel that I'm alive, there is no reason to keep on living. Instead, it would be easier to just disappear.

In the darkness, I try touching the bandages covering my eyes.

My sight will soon come back. In that case, I will completely ruin my eyes this time around.

I can't see it now, but if I fully recover it will be visible again. If I'm going to see **that** world again... I don't need anything like these eyes. Even if destroying my eyes means I will be unable to see the world on this side of that divide, it's still better than *that*.

But until that moment, I will be unable to act.

The Shiki of before would have destroyed her eyes without any hesitation, but the current me is stopping at achieving a temporary darkness.

--- It's so... pitiful.

While I have no will to live, I don't even have any will to die. This emotionless self of mine doesn't feel any

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attraction towards any action. I can only affirm another's will.

So if that unidentifiable smoke tries to kill me, I have no thoughts of stopping it.

The thought of death holds no attractions for me but I don't feel like resisting it either.

Because... Happiness or sadness, if they are things I could only obtain as Ryougi Shiki...

Then the present me has no reason to live on.

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## Garan-no-Dou

### 1

Aozaki Touko first heard the story of the person called Ryougi Shiki on a nice afternoon, not long after they had entered the month of June.

The origin of it all was that the new employee she had just hired on impulse was Ryougi Shiki's friend, and as a way to pass the time, she lent an ear to his story.

According to his tale, the person called Ryougi Shiki fell into a comatose state after a traffic accident two years ago. She was retaining her life functions, but there was no possibility of her waking up. Not only that, but the growth of her body also seemed to have stopped. At first, Touko couldn't believe this apparent contradiction. How could a person's life functions continue if they've stopped growing?

"... Hmm, the only time an organism does not grow is if it is dead. No, even pressure over time affects the dead. A corpse passes through the growth called decay and returns to the earth. The only thing that moves but

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doesn't grow would be that wind-up doll you brought in and set loose a while ago."

"But it's true. Since the accident, it doesn't look like she's aged a bit. Are there any other cases where a person is in a coma for which there's no explainable cause, Touko-san?"

"Hmmm..." goes Touko upon hearing the new employee's question, and crosses her arms.

"Let's see. There was that famous one in that country over there. A newly married woman in her twenties fell into a coma. She woke up after fifty years had passed - don't you know that one?"

In reply to Touko's words, the new employee says "No," and shakes his head.

"Uh, how was that person when she woke up?"

"Extremely normal. As if she hadn't been sleeping for 50 long years. Her mind was revived just as it had been in her twenties - apparently, it made her husband sad."

"--- Eh? Sad? How come? His wife's recovery should be a joyous occurrence."

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"The thing is, her mind was still just as it was in her twenties, but her body had grown old into its seventies. Even in a comatose state, leaving something alive means that it will degrade - you can't do anything about that.

So this seventy-year-old granny is always urging her husband to go out as if she's still in her twenties. The husband has lived the seventy years normally, so he's normal - the problem is the wife. Because fifty years have flowed past without her knowledge, she can't accept the fact no matter how you explain it. It's not that she doesn't want to accept it, she really can't conceive it to be the truth.

It's a tragedy among tragedies. They say that the lady who wanted to go out to play with that wrinkled face of hers was persuaded not to by her husband, who was in tears. They also say that he had this thought: if it was going to be like this, it would have been better if she hadn't woken up at all.

How was it? This dream-like tragedy, it's actually something that happened in the past. Was it useful?"

In wonder, he actually nodded in response to Touko's sarcastic question.

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"Oh, are you onto something?"

He gave a small nod to the impishly smiling Touko.

"...Yeah, a little. I'm thinking it might be like this. That Shiki might be trying not to wake up."

"It sounds like there's a past there. Good. Since I'm bored, shall I listen to the story as a way to pass the time?"

He gets angry at Touko, who really thinks of it as just another way to kill time, and turns away.

"No thank you. Touko-san, your insensitivity is a real problem."

"What? You are the one who brought it up. I understand, so spill it. It's not just a whim for me either. That Azaka, every time she rings it's Shiki this and Shiki that. If I have no idea as to what kind of person this Shiki is, I can't reply, can I?"

At the mention of Azaka's name, he put on a sour face.

"I've been meaning to ask you for a while, but... how did my little sister come to know you, Touko-san?"

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"One year ago at a tourist spot. I got caught up in an impossible situation and my cover was totally blown."

"...Well, okay, but Azaka is a very naive child, so please avoid that talk of what's there and what's not around her. She's in that period where I'm worried about her even without her getting involved in all that."

"Azaka... naive? Well, your relationship with your little sister is your problem, so I won't get involved. Instead, share that story about that kid called Shiki."

Unable to withstand Touko, who had pushed herself onto the desk, he began talking.

About his friend Ryougi Shiki's personality and her unique character.

During high school, he and Ryougi Shiki were classmates. He had a relationship with the name Ryougi Shiki before entering high school, and after getting put in the same class as her, became friends. The only person to have a friendly relationship with Ryougi Shiki, who didn't want any friends, was him.

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But, after the street murders during the first year of high school, Ryougi Shiki began changing in a strange way.

She confessed to him that she had a dual personality, and that her other side enjoyed murder.

To be truthful, how R. Shiki was connected to the street murders two years ago is still a mystery. Before anything could be confirmed, she had an accident in front of his eyes and was moved to the hospital.

During the first days of March, on that cold night of the falling rain.

That kind of story about someone's life. Touko treated it as just another story told over a beer, but as the story progressed the smile disappeared from her face.

"--- That's all there is to know about the relationship between Shiki and me. Although the story is already two years old."

"--- So is that why her growth has stopped? Stocking up her life. It's not even as if she's a vampire."

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Heh, Touko smirked, with the end of the lips curled up.

"So, how do you write that kid's name? It would be in kanji, wouldn't it?"

"Shiki(數) from (), why?"

"Is it the Shiki of Shikigami(式)? And her family name is Ryougi at that. That's just perfect."

Stubbing out the cigarette she had been biting in the ashtray, Touko stood up, as if unable to tolerate something any longer.

"Was that hospital in the suburbs? This is getting interesting... I'll be right back."

Without waiting for a reply, Touko left the office behind her.

*I can't believe I'm getting involved in this sort of nonsense at a place like this. What kind of fate is this?* Touko bit her lip

Ryougi Shiki's recovery is a few days later.

The fact that the situation doesn't even allow for the relatives to visit means that normal visits are out of the question.

Is it because of that?

Is that the reason that the new employee is concentrating on his desk-work with a sulkiness which makes it seem that his whole person has undergone a change?

"It's gloomy, too gloomy."

"Yes ma'am. A light, I'll obtain one that's suitable."

He replies without even looking at Touko.

There are times when a dutiful person will show absurdly eccentric conduct as a result of having missed something. Thinking this teen is of that sort, Touko speaks to him.

"Don't think so obsessively about it. You seem ready to just charge in there tonight or something."

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"Impossible, ma'am. That hospital, the security is nothing short of a research lab's."

In contrast to the casual manner in which he replies, it seems as if he's carried out a pretty thorough investigation.

Touko shrugs, thinking: *Well, I can't let a brand new employee become a criminal.*

"... I was going to stay quiet about this, but since you are so agitated, I'll tell you. I'm going to be working at the hospital as a stand-in from tomorrow. I'll find out how Ryougi Shiki is, so just sit tight for now."

"--- What?"

"It just so happened that I got invited as a doctor. Normally I would have refused, but this time it's not as if it's someone else's business. Seeing as I dragged the story out of you, I thought that I had to at least do this for you."  
"

Touko speaks as if it's no big deal.

Rising up from his chair, he approaches Touko and grabs hold of her two hands. Voom, voom. The two

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people's hands go up and down. ...Not realizing that this is an expression of his admiration, Touko stares at him with a stiff face.

"You have some strange hobbies, don't you?"

"I'm delighted! In fact, I'm stunned! There's a gentle and virtuous side to Touko-san like in other people after all!"

"... I realized I'm not like others, but I think it's better not to say things like that."

"Sorry, I wasn't thinking. Ah, so that's why you are dressed formally today. It looks very smart; it really suits you. I couldn't recognize you!"

"... My outfit's the same as always, but whatever, I'll accept the compliments."

It's useless to say anything, Touko realizes, and quietly folds things up.

"So don't do anything rash. Even without that sort of thing, that hospital is strange. You will sit here and look after the office, got it?"

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At that, the until-then hyperactive employee settles down.

"... Strange, you mean that hospital?"

"Yeah. There's a ward against something placed there. It seems like another magician was meddling with things. Of course, the target wasn't Ryougi Shiki. If it was, they wouldn't have held off for two years."

It was a whopper of a lie, but the confident way in which she spoke meant he didn't suspect a thing.

"... Uhm, a ward. That's like the second floor of this building, isn't it?"

"Yep. A ward is something of different levels which isolates a specified area. They range from ones that really create a wall to ones that cover the target area with an invisible barrier. The highest ranking wards are a form of subliminal coercion that goes, "nothing has been done but no one approaches". It's the same as this building. If you put in place a *suggestion* like "anyone who does not have a reason to come here will not be conscious of this place", a ward will be formed which will continue to exist without anyone noticing. A ward that just mimics

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another world and makes people realize that something is wrong is the worst of the worst."

A strangeness which prevents you from noticing strangeness - that is her rule of vacancy. A ward which everyone ignores and passes although it's on the map. A world where a pre-eminent magician lives appears to be just like any other neighboring house.

But, that ward, this new employee unconsciously broke it. This building which he shouldn't have been able to find unless he knew Aozaki Touko, he found too easily.

... Well, that is also the reason she hired him.

"... So, is that hospital's ward a dangerous one?"

"Try listening to what someone is saying. A ward itself does no harm. That word, it originates from Buddhism. A ward is always something that isolates an area from the outside world, although it has somehow come to represent technique by which a magician protects his or her body.

Understand? I said this just before, but the best wards don't feel weird to a normal person. Let's call it "an idea

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which forces itself on the unconscious mind". The best of the best reach the stage of "disconnection of space"; but to go that far you are looking at magicians rather than sorcerers. Currently there's only one magician in this country, so basically that kind of ward just can't be formed.

Well, nothing that powerful was formed, but the ward placed around that hospital is pretty complex. It's good enough that even I didn't notice it for a while. There's a ward specialist that I know - this skill is at the same level as that guy's.

... Well, among ward specialists there are a lot of philosophers. Most of them are well distanced from anything accompanied by violence, so it should be alright for now."

That's right, there's no danger in the ward itself. The problem is what is happening within the bounds of that space cut off from the rest of the world. That hospital's ward is aimed inwards, not outwards. In short, it's of the kind that makes it so no one notices no matter what happens within the building. For example, if a room was to explode in the middle of the night, not one person would be woken up by the noise.

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Touko didn't tell him that. Saying something about the time creeping along, she walks out with her eyes focused on the clock.

His voices catches on her narrow back.

"Touko-san. Shiki, take good care of her."

"Alright," Touko says, waving. He asks her another trivial question even though she didn't even bother to turn around.

"Ah, yes. Touko-san, who's that ward specialist you know?"

*Tock*, Touko's feet stop.

She falls into thought for a second, then swings her head around to pierce him with her eyes as she replies.

"Well, if he's a ward specialist, he's a monk of course."

3

Around six days had passed since Touko was invited to the hospital as a provisional doctor. Every time Touko passed on the news to her employee that Ryougi Shiki's

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condition was improving every day, she couldn't help but have one little worry.

That is, whether or not the Ryougi Shiki of the present and the Ryougi Shiki of the past were the same to another person.

"Taking physiotherapy twice a day and getting a CT scan are like work for her. You'll be able to see her on the day she's released, so just wait a little more."

Having come back from the hospital, Touko smooths out her orange necktie and sits on the desk.

The time of evening with summer just ahead.

The red blaze of the sunset dyes the lightless interior of the office a dark orange.

"Physiotherapy twice a day? Will Shiki be okay with just that? She's been asleep for two years."

"They say they moved her joints for her even though she was asleep. On top of that, physiotherapy isn't exercise. Five minutes a day is sufficient. Originally, the term rehabilitation wasn't a medical term, but meant the recovery of one's dignity as a human. That's how Ryougi

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Shiki, who has been lying around until now, has been able to regain the feeling that she is human. The body's recovery... well, that's a different story."

Touko lights the cigarette she's holding in her mouth, cutting off the conversation for a while.

"But you know, the problem isn't of the body, but rather the mind. That kid is becoming different from the Ryougi Shiki of before."

"--- Is it... memory loss?"

As if he had prepared for such a thing, he hesitantly says something stupid.

"Hmm, I wonder.... I believe her personality itself is the same as before. There hasn't been a change to Ryougi Shiki herself. What has changed is Shiki. I don't know if this will come as a shock to you."

"I'm plenty used to this kind of thing by now. Please explain fully. Shiki... what's happened to her?"

"Mmm, to tell the truth. She's completely empty.

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Shiki, who until now had always carried around another person inside of her... SHIKI no longer exists. No, she must be unsure whether or not she's even Shiki or SHIKI.

When she woke up, SHIKI was already gone from inside her. Through his loss, her mind has become a blank space. Maybe --- that kid won't be able to stand the empty space... Her heart is empty. Like a hole, it's completely open. Even the air passes through like the wind."

"What do you mean, SHIKI's gone --- how come?"

"He probably died in Shiki's stead. However it happened, Ryougi Shiki died in that accident two years ago. You might misunderstand since she's somehow still alive, but just assume for a minute that she died. Ryougi Shiki came back to life as a new entity inside the body of Ryougi Shiki. The Shiki of now, the Shiki of the past, and the Shiki of the present derived from those memories are nothing but strangers. No one can accept another person's history as their own. That child will perhaps be spending her nights with the thought that 'I'm still not myself'."

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"... Another person? So, Shiki can't remember the things that have happened?"

"No, she remembers. At present she is definitely the Shiki you know. The reason she's still alive is because she had the equal but separate personalities of Shiki and SHIKI.

Ryouri Shiki suffered a death of the mind due to the accident. Let's say that SHIKI accepted the role of dying at that time. So, although she should have died at that moment, Shiki was still there in her brain, and as a consequence, her mind didn't die. Shiki has been asleep because of the death of Ryouri Shiki, but since it was SHIKI that died, she was able to survive.

And so --- she was in a coma for two years, and although her body kept functioning, she didn't grow - all because she was dead yet still alive.

But the revived her is different from the past Shiki in the details. It's not so bad as to be called memory loss, but she probably won't be able to bring to mind any memories unless she needs to.

You can't say it's another person or that it's a complete stranger, but she's now different from the Shiki you've

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known until now. A third personality which is an amalgam of the personalities of Shiki and SHIKI - it would be most appropriate to accept her as such."

... That's what she said, but in reality such a thing could not happen.

As long as Shiki was Ryougi, there was no need to mix with SHIKI, who was her other half, and Shiki wouldn't be able to fill the hole left by SHIKI's absence by herself.

Avoiding any reference to that fact, Touko continues talking.

"Even if she's revived as a wholly different person, she's still Ryougi Shiki. No matter how little confidence you have in the fact that you are you --- that child is still Ryougi Shiki. Right now she probably can't even feel that she's alive, but the time will come when she will accept that she is Shiki.

A rose is born as a rose. It doesn't become a different flower just because the ground it's on and the water it receives change."

So don't be so hung up over it all, she added in a whisper.

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"Eventually, an empty hole has to be filled. She will have to build a new self, not based on her memories of the past, but through her experiences in the present. That's a shrine that no one can help her build. It's not something another person should meddle in. In short, all you have to do is treat her as you've always done. Oh, and it seemed like they were going to release her pretty soon."

Throwing the burnt-down cigarette stub out the window, Touko raises her arms and straightens her back.

Crick, crick, crack. The sound her bones make can be clearly heard.

"I knew I shouldn't have done something I'm not used to. The cigarettes tasted so bad that I was about to go crazy."

She talked while letting out a long sigh, as if she was tired of the world.



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## /4

As the usual morning check-up ended, I realised that it was now the 20th. Which meant that it has now been seven days since I woke up. My body has also recovered without a hitch, so I am going to be released tomorrow. The bandages over my two eyes, I will also be able to take them off tomorrow morning.

Seven days... a week.

I haven't gained much during this period of time.

I've lost so many things that I'm not even sure what I've lost.

My parents, Akitaka, they are probably the same as they were before. But to me, they feel like different people. The fading away of all that once surrounded me is something that can't be helped, since the one called Ryougi Shiki has changed.

I touch the bandage covering my eyes.

The only thing I gained in exchange for everything I have lost is this.

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I, who experienced 「death for two years while still alive. My body has changed so that I can now view such formless concepts.

The first thing I saw upon waking up from the coma was not the surprised nurse running towards me... it was the line wrapping around her throat. People, walls, even the air itself... there are incredibly fine lines visible on everything. Those lines were always moving and irregular. But I suffered from an obsession with the idea that death would spread out at any moment from those individual concepts and pull me in. I saw a hallucination in which the approaching nurse crumbled into pieces starting from the line in her neck.

When I understood what those lines were --- I crushed my two eyes with my own hands.

My hands hadn't moved in two years and just clenching them brought on agonizing pain, but I still moved my arms. Luckily or unluckily, my arms were still weak and I was stopped by the doctors in the process of destroying my eyes. They decided that it was just a sudden impulse brought on by the turbidity of my mind and weren't particularly interested in why I had tried to crush my eyes.

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"Are my eyes --- going to recover soon?"

I don't want that. That kind of world, I never want to see it again.

A world where nothing exists. While I was 「there, I was content and at peace.

--- I can't believe it now. Remembering that world after I woke up I thought about it and there couldn't be anything more pathetic than that world. That darkness, even if it was just a nightmare I dreamt up during my sleep --- I can't stand the thought of falling into that place again.

And, these two eyes of mine that are connected to that place.

I bring my fingertips to my eyes.

After that, all that's left is to stab my eyes with those fingertips as cleanly as if I was swinging a bamboo sword.

"Just a second, hold up. You give up too quickly."

Suddenly a noise.

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I turn my senses towards the door.

The thing that is there is --- what is it?

Without a sound the someone comes closer, coming right up to the bed where I'm reposed.

"Is it the 'mystic eyes of death perception'? It's too wasteful to destroy that, Shiki. Especially seeing as anything you can see will be seen even if you ruin your eyes. You see, a curse is something that comes back if you throw it away."

"Are you --- human?"

My question provokes a reaction which sounds like somebody trying not to laugh.

Whoosh, I hear the sound of a lighter being flicked and a flame springing out.

"I'm a sorceress. I came here to teach you how to use those eyes of yours."

That familiar female voice... This someone is without a doubt the counsellor.

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"What do you mean, how to use these eyes...?"

"Well, it will only be a little better than now, but I suppose it's better than nothing. Your mystic eyes that can conceive another's death by just looking are the first since the time of the Celtic gods. Erasing them is too wasteful."

It's called Balor. The lady adds some incomprehensible words.

"Mystic eyes are normally the result of you bringing about some kind of augmentation effect for your eyes through spiritual surgery. But in your case, I think they came about naturally. An ability you originally had was brought to the fore by the accident. By the sounds of it, it seemed that the child called Shiki was always seeing to the heart of everything."

... She talks as if she knows.

Actually, as she said, Shiki had always been gazing at a far-off location. I think that even while looking at a person, she saw not the exterior, but that person's core.

Although Shiki herself wasn't aware of it.

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"Well, you see, that was definitely a control mechanism Shiki used unconsciously. You shouldn't try to look at exteriors.

Every object has flaws. The fancy of wishing everything could be taken apart and remade only exists because there's no such thing as a perfect object.

Your eyes can see those flaws, as if they were a microscope. Your spiritual sight is too strong. You can see those lines that are invisible to us, and that brain of yours that was in contact with death for so long can even understand what they are. In conclusion, you can see death. Not only see it, but you can even touch it. A living organism's lines of death will keep changing position as long as it's alive. The ability to see those lines clearly, there's not much difference between that and mystic eyes that can kill with a look. If you must stab those eyes, I will receive them instead. I will pay you any price you name."

"... Did you say I will be able to see this even if my eyes can't see? In that case, there's no reason for me to stab them."

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"Well, yes. You can't lead a normal life anyway. Leave your agonizing at that, Ryougi Shiki. Open your eyes a bit. You are originally a human of my kind. If you are --- abandon any dreams you have of living like everyone else."

"---."

... That one sentence, in some ways it was conclusive.

But I felt as if I shouldn't accept it for some reason.

I reply with the strongest rebuttal I can manage at this time.

"Something as pitiful as an urge to live on --- I don't have any such thing."

"Heh. Is that because you've emptied your mind? But you don't want to die, do you? Because you've seen that world. Since you've reached a state of realization that not even a Keter can reach, you gorged brat.

Do you understand? Your problem's simple. Okay, you've revived as another person. So what? It's just that SHIKI isn't here. I guess since you and SHIKI were

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definitely a set, his absence alone would mean that you are a whole different person. Even if you are the very embodiment of Shiki, I understand that you are different from before.

But what I'm saying is that that's as far as it goes.

Right now you are desperately rejecting death while you have no will to live. You have no reason to live on, but you fear the thing called death. Life or death - unable to choose either side you are walking a tightrope on the boundary of the two. I suppose it's enough to empty your mind."

"... You keep chattering away as if you know everything..."

I glare at the woman. At that moment --- without a hint of doubt, my eyes which should be blind catch sight of the woman's outline and black lines.

「deathcoils out towards me from the woman's lines.

"Did you see it? It's because there are flaws that they move with just that much contact. In the eyes of the idle spirits here, your body is the perfect vessel. If you don't wake up you are going to be dragged away and killed."

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By that talk of being dragged away and killed, does she mean that white smoke?

But that doesn't come around here anymore.

"Idle spirits are nothing more than a part of the soul left behind after death. They don't have a will, so they just wander around. But as they are parts, they keep grouping together to form a whole until they become a ghost. They don't have a will, but basic desires remain. Things like 'I want to return to my former self', or 'I want a human body'.

A hospital has a lot of idle spirits. They form drifting ghosts and look for a body they can inhabit. Since they are so weak, normal people can't feel them or even come into contact with them. Formless spirits only follow people with paranormal abilities who can perceive them. Sorcerers who make a living out of talking to ghosts protect their egos with a shell, so it's very rare for them to be taken down by a drifting ghost.

On the other hand --- they will probably latch onto a person with an empty heart, say you for example, pretty easily."

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There is a hint of contempt in her voice as she speaks.

So, was that why that smoke came to me? If that was the case, why didn't it possess me? If it had tried to become my kernel, I wouldn't have resisted.

"--- Pathetic. Even the rune's protection is meaningless like this. That's it - as expected, this doesn't suit you. Just do as you will after this."

After speaking so venomously the lady distanced herself from the bed.

Just before she shut the door to the room, that lady left behind one last remark.

"But you know, did SHIKI really die for nothing, Ryougi Shiki?"

I couldn't reply to that.

Really --- that lady only touches the subjects I am avoiding and leaves them behind like thorns.

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It's night.

Darkness surrounds me. Tonight there isn't even the sound of anyone walking through the corridors.

In the midst of that night which was peaceful as a silent lake deep within a mountain range, I was recalling my conversation with that lady.

No, just that last undeniable question.

For what reason did SHIKI die in Shiki's stead? SHIKI isn't here to reply.

--- SHIKI, who is no longer here.

Exactly why did he disappear?

What did he disappear in exchange for?

SHIKI, who liked to dream.

He was always asleep. But on that night of the rain, he abandoned even that action and died.

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The self I can no longer meet, the self I could never meet in the first place.

SHIKI, who was always myself.

My consciousness settles down.

In an attempt to reach the conclusion he reached I look back through my memories.

Creak, the door to the room opens.

Following that slow footsteps approach me.

Is it a nurse? No, the time is already past midnight.

If it's a visitor, if could only be ---

At that moment a human hand wraps around my neck

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The cold hand squeezes as if to break my neck just like that.



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/5

"Ah ---."

The pressure on her neck makes Shiki cry out in pain.

I can't breathe. My throat is getting crushed. At this rate my neck is going to be twisted off before I have any problems breathing.

Shiki stares at the opponent with her unseeing eyes.

... It's not --- a human.

No, the body is that of a human, but the person who is choking the life out of her is already dead. A corpse is moving by itself and attacking Shiki who is on the bed.

The pressure on her neck does not ease.

Shiki resists, holding the attacker's arms with both hands but the difference in strength is obvious.

*More than anything --- wasn't this what she wanted?*

"---."

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Shiki stops breathing and removes her hands from the corpse's arm.

If I'm going to be killed like this it's okay, so just give up. After all there's no meaning to my life. To exist when you cannot even feel that you are alive, there can be no greater agony than that.

To just disappear is natural providence, even a thought like that comes into my mind.

My strength is slipping away.

Although only a few seconds would have flowed past the time seems to pass very slowly. It stretches like a rubber band.

The corpse squeezes down on Shiki's throat. Heatless fingers that feel as if they are made of wood dig into her neck.

This murder has no feeling to it, and from the start there was no sign of a will behind it either.

The flesh of my neck tears.

The flow of blood is proof that I'm alive.

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By dying --- dying like SHIKI --- I am throwing that away.

... Throwing it away? That phrase makes Shiki regain consciousness.

A sudden question forms.

Would he have died so willingly.

... That's right, I hadn't thought of that.

Whatever the reason, would his will have been completely behind his decision?

There's no way he would have wanted to die.

--- Death is such a lonely and worthless thing.

Death is such a black and unpleasant thing.

Death, would have been scarier than anything else --- !

"--- No."

All of a sudden Shiki's body is vitalised.

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Grabbing the corpse's neck with both hands she pushes the opponent's belly with one foot from her squashed position and ---

"I don't want to fall into that place again --- !"

--- Kicks the lump of meat with all her might.

Slip, slipping from the bloody flesh the corpse's hands come off Shiki's neck.

Shiki gets off the bed.

The corpse leaps at Shiki straight away and the two get tangled up in the lightless hospital room.

The corpse's body is that of an adult human, two heads bigger than Shiki. No matter how she struggles Shiki is pushed back. With both arms trapped Shiki slowly pulls back. It's a small hospital room so she soon reaches the wall. Whack, the moment she touched the wall Shiki made up her mind.

She voluntarily fled so that there would be a window behind her.

She calculated how she would fall back.

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The problem --- how many floors up it is.

"--- Don't hesitate."

Scolding herself she removes the arms that were holding the corpse back.

The corpse stretches its hands towards her neck, but faster than that --- she opened the window with her freed hands and the two fell out as if they were getting tangled up.

The instant I begin to fall.

I grab the corpse's head and reverse who is above and who is below.

(spin - SoundFX), after the arrangement changed so that the corpse was on the ground side and I was on top riding it, I jumped by sense alone.

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The ground already seems to be right in front of my nose.

The corpse's body gets hurled against the ground, and I was jumping horizontal to the ground before my body could roll over.

(Ururu - SoundFX), scattering the dirt of the hospital lawn I land with both arms and legs.

The corpse fell on the hospital flower beds --- and it happened that I slipped and fell on the lawn which is a fair distance from there.

I had just executed a miraculous fall, the likes of which I hadn't done once in the dojo --- but the weight of that great height of three floors was paralyzing my body.

Around me are only the trees of the garden and the silent night, where not a sound can be heard even when it's like this.

My body doesn't move and I can only feel the pain in my neck.

Ahhhh --- I'm still alive.

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And --- That corpse hasn't died yet.

If I don't want to die it's obvious as to what I need to do.

Kill before you are killed. Just by thinking that the emptiness in my heart disappears. At the same time a lot of feelings are unlocked.

"Really, what is this." I grumble.

Through this sort of thing I open my eyes.

Yes --- the me that was brooding for so long seems like an idiot.

When the answer is so simple.

"How surprising. Are you a cat?"

The voice comes from right behind Shiki.

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Without turning to look Shiki was valiantly enduring the shock of the landing.

"You? Why are you at a place like this?"

The self-titled magus/counsellor answers Shiki's question as if it wasn't important.

"Because I was keeping watch. I was standing guard thinking they would come around tonight or so. See, you don't have any time to rest. A hospital definitely has some strong corpses. They can't get into a live body so they decided to show their abilities. After infecting a corpse they were going to make you theirs after killing you."

"Whatever's going on, it's all the fault of that weird rock you gave me."

Shiki talks as she leans against the ground. In her words there's not even a hint of the hesitation she has shown until now.

"Oh, you knew? Well, yes. This is definitely my mistake. I placed a ward around the room so spirits couldn't get in, but I never expected they would go and

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obtain a body in order to break it. Normally they don't have that sort of intelligence."

Hahaha, the magus laughs as if she's amused.

"Really? In that case you do something."

"Okay."

Tock, and the magus lifts her finger.

How would it have looked to the Shiki who couldn't see?

The magus writes in the air with her cigarette flame. The writing is reflected on the corpse as if it were being projected.

The far-off country composed only of straight lines, the engraved sorcery of a far-off world. The circuit called Rune moves and in an instant --- the body of the corpse lying collapsed on the ground begins to burn.

"--- it's too weak with just the F in the air." The magus mumbles.

The flame covered corpse slowly stands up.

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Somehow moving with two completely broken legs the corpse drags itself towards Shiki as if moving by muscle power alone.

The flames soon go out.

"Oi --- you charlatan."

"Don't shout like that. It's very difficult to destroy something the size of a human. A living person is finished if you just burn the heart, but you can't do that with the living dead. They are dead so it doesn't matter whether they lose a head or an arm. You realize that you can't get rid of a human itself with something that has the firepower of a gun right? To stop that thing you would have to bring the firepower of a crematorium --- or a monk of high moral integrity."

"That's enough showing off. Whatever the problem I think it's too much for you to handle."

It seemed that Shiki's comment severely hurt the magus's self-respect.

"It's too much for you to handle as well. A corpse is already dead so you can't kill it. Coincidentally, while

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you can kill a person with what you have you can't get rid of them. Let's run away for now."

The magus retreats.

But Shiki doesn't move.

It's not that the descent from the third floor broke her leg.

She is, just smiling.

"Whether it's dead or whatever, that corpse is 'alive'. In that case ---."

She gets up from her leaning position.

That was similar to the bent-back posture of a predator leaping at its prey.

Shhhk, she touches her neck. Blood is still flowing. The flesh is torn. There is a mark where she was strangled --- but she is still alive.

And that was an ecstatic sensation.

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"--- Whatever it is, I'm going to kill it."

Shrrrg, she unwraps the bandages covering her eyes.

In the darkness the Mystic Eyes of Death Perception are awakened.

Two delicate legs kick the ground.

The corpse reaches out with its arms at Shiki who is rushing towards it.

Narrowly slipping past it she rips apart the corpse with one hand as if she is feeling for the line visible to her eyes.

Shiki's nails pass through in an even cut from the right shoulder to the left hip.

Thanks to that her fingerbone broke but the corpse's wound was much greater.

(collapse -SoundFX), because the strings controlling it have been cut the corpse falls to the ground. One arm

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though apparently still has strings attached and the corpse which has slowly crawled over to her grabs Shiki's ankle.

Shiki doesn't hesitate and grinds that arm under her foot.

"A dead body shouldn't appear before me," said Shiki and laughed silently.

I'm alive.

It's like my state of mind until now was a lie, to think that I can so clearly feel that I'm alive...

"Shiki!

Calling Shiki loudly the magus throws something towards her.

One undecorated silver-coloured knife.

Shiki grabs the knife which stuck in the ground and looks at the still moving corpse as if it were a wart. And just like that, she stabs the corpse's neck with the knife.

The corpse quickly stops moving --- but then.

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"Idiot, if you are going to stab it stab the main body itself!"

The disastrous result appeared faster than the magus's scolding.

As soon as Shiki stabbed the corpse --- smoke popped out of the dead body. Becoming desperate as if it wants to run away the smoke disappears into Shiki's body.

"---,"

(collapse-SoundFX), Shiki's knees limply hit the ground.

Unable to infect her till now because she was conscious, the spirits take advantage of the instant when Shiki loses her sense of self due to the excitement of killing and invade her body.

"You fumbled the finish idiot."

The magus comes running over. But Shiki's body stops that with one hand.

Don't come, at this signal the magus stops and stands still.

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Shiki's body grabs the hilt of the knife with both hands and points the blade at her own chest.

The blank eyes regain their strong resolve.

Lips shut tight, she bites down on her teeth.

The tip of the knife touches her chest.

Her will and her body --- they have not been taken over by something so weak as a wandering spirit.

"Now I won't lose you."

Her mumbling isn't directed at anyone else, it's directed at herself. Shiki perceives the death of the thing crawling around inside her.

What is being stabbed is Ryougi Shiki's body. But, that only kills that collective entity that cannot exist. Shiki is confident that she will not receive a wound.

And so she gathered her strength.

"I am killing the weak me."

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To something like you --- I will not hand over Ryougi Shiki.

The knife slides easily into her chest.

She pulls out the silver-coloured knife.

No blood flows. She only has the pain to tell her that she has stabbed her chest.

Shing, Shiki swings the knife as if she is shaking the dirty soul of the blade.

"Hey, you said it. That you would teach me the way to use these eyes."

Her way of speaking now begins to settle into a pattern. The magus nods her head in satisfaction at this change.

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"There are conditions, but I'll teach you how to use your death perception. In return help me with my work. I just lost the one I bossed around so I need a new pair of feet and hands right now."

Shiki doesn't even turn around to face the magus and quietly says, "So that's how it is".

"If I do that can I kill people?"

It's an utterance to make even the magus shiver.

"Ahhh, of course."

"In that case I will do it. Use me as you will. Since I didn't have any objectives apart from that anyway."

Shiki with her melancholic voice, she slowly sinks to the ground. Maybe because of her exhaustion from the recent events --- or maybe because of her violent act of stabbing her own chest.

The magus picks up her body and gazes at her sleeping face. A face too ambiguous to call it sleep --- a frozen face as if she is dead.

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The sorceress who gazes upon that face for a long while. Before long she mumbles some words.

"You say you don't have any objectives? That's tragic, you know, you are still confused."

Shiki's peaceful appearance.

The sorceress talks as if she resents it.

"The fact that you are empty means that you can fill that emptiness with as much as you want. You happy person, where's a better future than that?"

Mumbling something like that the magus clicks her tongue.

Because she is embarrassed at herself for saying such sincere words.

... When they were things she had forgotten for such a long time.



## Void Shrine (Garan-no-Dou)

I think of the time when my consciousness has fallen into dreaming and settled down.

SHIKI who has disappeared. A self who was another person. What did he disappear in exchange for, what did he sacrifice his life to protect?

Going through Ryougi Shiki's memories, I realised what.

Probably --- SHIKI protected his dream. His dream that he would live happily.

Was that dream that class friend? Or was that young man the person he wanted to be as a man? That's something I can no longer find out.

SHIKI disappeared so he wouldn't lose him and Shiki.

Leaving me, with this deep solitude.

The morning sunlight enters the room.

At that warmth, my eyes, which have recovered their sight, open.

I'm sleeping in the bed. That incident last night would have been settled well by the sorceress. No, that kind of thing is unimportant. Rather than things like that, let's think of him for now.

Still in that prone position, I lay there without even moving my head and breathed in the morning air.

How long has it been since I woke to the morning sunlight?

Thin but strong. The bright light colors over the darkness in my heart.

This strange life I have just taken hold of and --- The other me that will not return, they melt together and disappear into the light. The existence of Ryougi SHIKI and his dreams... are disappearing.

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If I could cry, I wanted to shed tears for him. But my eyes are dry. I've decided to cry only once, and it's not right to cry about this.

Now that I can no longer go back, I'll never regret it again.

Like this darkness, opening up in front of the morning sunlight.

To disappear cleanly like this, it's what he would have wanted.

"Hello, Shiki."

A voice from next to me.

I just twist my head to the side.

Standing there is the friend I knew a long time ago.  
The black-rimmed glasses, even his unstyled black hair,  
he really hasn't changed.

"Do you, know me... ?"

His voice is strangely shaky.

... Ahhh, I already knew. That you were always  
waiting for Shiki, and that only you were always there,  
protecting me.

"Kokutou Mikiya. Sounds like a French poet."

At my mumbling voice, he smiles brightly. Like when  
we met at school after just one day, that brightly.

How much effort was hidden in that simple smile, I  
can't know.

Only --- it seems he remembers that promise as well.

"It's great that the weather is nice today. Perfect to get  
out of hospital."

With tears brimming in his eyes, he speaks as naturally as he can.

To the empty me, that was warmer than anything. A smiling face over a crying face, that's what this friend chose.

To acknowledge isolation rather than be isolated, that's what SHIKI chose.

--- Although I haven't chosen either side yet.

"... Ahhh. Are there things that don't disappear?"

His smiling face that seems to become one with the soft sunlight, I just blankly gazed upon it.

Until I was sick of it.

--- I know that the hole punched in my chest can't be filled with things like that, but right now, I don't want to do anything else. Because...

... His soft, smiling face.

That was the same face as the one in my memories.

/Void Shrine(Garan-no-Dou)

**/End**